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'Corona Jihad'.
Examining Anti-Muslim Narratives in India during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Abstract: This article argues that during the Covid-19 pandemic in India, anti-Muslim narratives and disinformation were disseminated through mass media, social media and statements of government leaders. This led to the spread of Islamophobia, as indicated by the use of 'Corona Jihad' as a neologism during the pandemic. As a result, Muslims and Muslim organisations such as the Tablighi Jamaat were scapegoated and blamed for spreading Covid cases. They were targeted through hate speeches, socio-economic boycott campaigns and arrests by police. While several writings (quoted in this article) have explained and critiqued the notion of 'Corona Jihad', this article argues that 'Corona Jihad' is one of the many iterations of *jihad* depicted by Hindu nationalists in Islamophobic conspiracy beliefs against Muslims. These narratives of *jihad* are symptomatic of the essentialisation of Indian Muslims as the internal enemy of the Indian state.

Keywords: *Corona Jihad*, *Thook Jihad*, *Islamophobia*, *hate speech*, *scapegoats*, *Indian Muslims*

1. Introduction

In March 2020, when the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic had begun in India, I received a WhatsApp image of a snake spitting venom and wearing a white skullcap. The symbolic meaning of the skullcap was unmistakable; it was the caricature of a Muslim. The image was part of a conspiracy belief that the Coronavirus infections in India were the handiwork of Muslims, that Muslims were infecting their fellow Indians with projectile spitting. In February 2022, my mother received a WhatsApp video clip, edited to show Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan, popularly known as SRK, supposedly spitting on the mortal remains of deceased singer Lata Mangeshkar. Khan is also a Muslim; after he attended the funeral rites of Mangeshkar, social media was abuzz with images and videos that were captioned, "Did SRK spit on Lata?" Both messages were accompanied by trending hashtags, '#CoronaJihad' and '#ThookJihad' respectively (*thook* is the Hindi word for saliva). Both accused Muslims of spitting, and hence contaminating, non-Muslims/Hindus. Such hashtagged messages contain shock value, which gives them the potential to go 'viral' on social media with its ecosystem of 'fake news' and disinformation that repeatedly targets Muslims. They reveal the predominance of anti-Muslim sentiments in contemporary India.

This paper argues that the uncertainties of the Covid-19 pandemic in India found a readymade scapegoat in Muslims, the largest religious minority group in India. This scapegoating was denoted by the neologism 'CoronaJihad', and popularised by mobilising anti-Muslim disinformation and conspiracy beliefs on social media. This led to acts of physical violence and social boycotting of Muslims, indicating that the technological/online and socio-political/offline milieus are intertwined. The word *jihad* in this context encapsulates a conspiracy belief fanned by right-wing Hindu nationalists alleging that Muslims of India are conducting a war against Hindus. 'Love jihad' is the earliest version of this conspiracy belief, in which Muslim men are accused of seducing Hindu women and converting them to Islam. But the iterations of *jihad* have expanded, 'Corona Jihad' being one of them. Others are described by compound words like 'Thook Jihad', 'Land Jihad', 'Population Jihad', and 'Naukri Jihad' (*naukri* in Hindi means employment). Depictions of Muslims as *jihadis* or threats to Indians and the Indian nation continue to be invoked in mainstream television channels, social media disinformation campaigns, and even hate speeches by political leaders especially those

belonging to the ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). By tracing the emergence and implications of these narratives about *jihad,* this paper is an attempt at theorising Islamophobia and its components prevailing in India.

2. The Virus Has a Name

The official response to 'Covid-19' by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of the government of India, when a sudden increase in cases was detected in March 2020, was to insist that there was no need for indiscriminate testing since the Coronavirus was not a health emergency and there had been no community transmissions. No clear estimate of the number of cases or the growing number of infections could be obtained. A twenty-one day lockdown was declared by the Prime Minister on 24 March; it was "identified as one of the most stringent in the world"[1] and was declared to be sufficient for containing the spread of the virus. This lackadaisical approach of the government and its insistence to not test community transmission of Covid changed when in end March, it was reported that an international religious conference organised in Delhi by the Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim missionary organisation, had emerged as the source of 27 Corona positive cases, 37 infections and six deaths. The conference attendees were tracked down and tested, with some state governments even threatening to file criminal cases against those who had not voluntarily approached the authorities to get their Covid infection status certified. As a consequence of this undue focus on the Covid positive cases linked to the Tablighi Jamaat, there were reports in the media which said, "Over 95% of the coronavirus cases reported over the last two days in India have been found to have links with the Tablighi Jamaat congregation in Delhi".[2] These numbers were a misrepresentation by the media; as Shoaib Daniyal wrote, the "sensationalist reporting" of the cases from the Jamaat gathering was the result of "sampling bias".[3] The irony of the media exaggerating and over-stating the number of Covid cases and deaths caused by the Jamaat congregation lies in the fact that the extent of death and disease is perpetually under-counted by the National Health Profile, the central health ministry's official portal for collating statistics on mortality and illness.[4] As Rukmini S. writes, the Covid pandemic "demonstrated the acute limitations of Indian state capacity" regarding transparency about data.[5] The Indian state constantly under-counted the numbers of Covid deaths to keep the official mortality rate low and to lend credence to the central government's notion that India had handled the pandemic better than any other country.

The hyperbole of highlighting the number of Covid cases exclusively linked to the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) had a singular effect. The TJ was declared to be a 'Covid-19 super spreader' and Chief Ministers of state governments such as Yogi Adityanath, a BJP hardliner, said that it was responsible for the spread of the coronavirus. The Union Health Ministry blamed the Tablighi Jamaat for the increase in the number of Coronavirus cases in the country. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs blacklisted 960 foreign nationals who had attended the TJ meeting, cancelled their visas and directed police in different states to file cases against them. An FIR registered by the Delhi Police against Maulana

[1] Reeta Chowdhari Tremblay and Namitha George, "India: Federalism, Majoritarian Nationalism, and the Vulnerable and Marginalised", in Victor V. Ramraj, ed., *COVID-19 in Asia: Law and Policy Contexts* (New York: Oxford U.P., 2021), 175.

[2] Nidhi Sharma, "647 Coronavirus Positive Cases in Two Days Linked to Tablighi Jamaat", *The Economic Times* (2020), *www.economictimes.com*.

[3] Shoaib Daniyal, "Explained: Sampling Bias Drove Sensationalist Reporting around Tablighi Coronavirus Cases", *Scroll.in* (2020), *www.scroll.in*.

[4] Rukmini S., *Whole Numbers and Half Truths: What Data Can and Cannot Tell Us About Modern India* (Chennai: Westland, 2021), 167.

[5] Ibid., 181.

Saad, the TJ head stated, "Mohd. Saad and the management deliberately, wilfully, negligently and malignantly disobeyed the directions ... they allowed a huge gathering to assemble inside a close premise [sic] over a protracted period of time without any semblance of social distance or provision of mask or hand sanitiser".[6] BJP leader Kapil Mishra tweeted that members from the Jamat should be treated like 'terrorists'.

Members of the TJ said in statements to the media that the people assembled at its headquarters in the Nizamuddin area of Delhi had been stranded because of the lockdown and unavailability of transport and the Delhi Police had not heeded the TJ's appeals for any alternate means of transport for them to depart from the premises. The TJ was reckless in overlooking the fallout of inviting foreign nationals during a pandemic, but the overzealousness of the police and the government in placing blame solely upon the TJ displays how they evaded taking responsibility by creating a scapegoat. With criminal cases filed against the TJ and the government reprimanding it in official statements and public speeches, right-wing television channels took the cue, and ran primetime shows to spotlight the culpability of the TJ. Suresh Chavhanke, the head of *Sudarshan News* said, "If India's mosques are posing a threat to Indians, and human bombs carrying coronavirus are roaming around freely, wouldn't you call it 'corona jihad'? We should keenly monitor these *jihadis* and the *jihadis* should be strictly punished under law".[7] Amit Malviya, head of the BJP IT-cell tweeted that the TJ gathering was "illegal" and an 'Islamic insurrection'".[8] On Twitter, 'Coronajihad' became a hashtag, along with 'TablighiVirus' and 'bioterror'. A report by Equality Labs, a South Asian-American human rights and technology start-up, studied the "peak virality" of these Twitter trends, stating that "there were over 293,000 conversations on Twitter with over 700,000 points of engagement.... #Coronajihad Islamophobic content reached 170 million users across Twitter".[9]

The Coronavirus was thus re-named and re-branded as the 'Tablighi Virus' while the scapegoating of the TJ quickly extended to Muslims in India (this is further discussed below). As Arjun Appadurai said, "One of the key features of anti-Muslim sentiment in India for quite a long time has been the idea that Muslims themselves are a kind of infection in the body politic ... there's a kind of affinity between this long-standing image and the new anxieties surrounding coronavirus".[10] Juxtaposing the name of the Tablighi Jamaat with the name of the virus was antithetical to the World Health Organisation's concern to de-stigmatise the name ascribed to the Coronavirus.[11] It gave the virus, a thing 'unknown', a 'local habitation and a name', thus embedding it within nationalist registers of identifying – and safeguarding – the self from the Muslim other.

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[6] Nitisha Kashyap, "'They Wilfully Disobeyed': What the FIR Against Tablighi Jamaat's Maulana Saad, 6 Others Says", *CNN News18* (2020), *www.news18.com*.

[7] Ayan Sharma and Chahak Gupta, "Audit of Bigotry: How Indian Media Vilified Tablighi Jamaat over Coronavirus Outbreak", *Newslaundry* (2020), *www.newslaundry.com*.

[8] Ritika Jain, "Covid-19: How Fake News and Modi Government Messaging Fuelled India's Latest Spiral of Islamophobia" *Scroll.in* (2020), *www.scroll.in*.

[9] T. Soundararajan, et al., "Coronajihad: An Analysis of Covid-19 Hate Speech and Disinformation. *The Implications on Content Moderation and Social Medial Policy*" (Equality Labs, 2020), 16.

[10] Cit. in Billy Perrigo, "It Was Already Dangerous to Be Muslim in India. Then Came the Coronavirus", *TIME* (2020), *www.time.com*.

[11] "WHO Director-General's Remarks at the Media Briefing on 2019-nCoV on 11 February 2020", *World Health Organization* (2020), *www.who.int*.

3. Media Censorship and Disinformation Campaigns during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic was designated as "the world's first social media pandemic" when "hate speech related to the virus" was spread online "almost as fast as the virus itself".[12] According to a report by Pew Research Centre, "the seemingly unstoppable manipulation of public perception, emotion and action via online disinformation – lies and hate speech deliberately weaponized in order to propagate destructive biases and fears" is one of the aspects of the "new normal".[13]

3.1 *The BJP government's use of social media apps*

In their study on social media and hate speech in India, Shakuntala Banaji and Ramnath Bhat point out that the current BJP government which came to power in 2014 and then in 2019 made extensive use of social media in its campaign, with PM Narendra Modi being "an early adopter" and "active user of social media".[14] The BJP IT cell comprises both full time workers and supporters of Modi and the BJP who are "notorious for bullying, abusive speech, trolling, doxing and spreading disinformation"[15] to shut down criticism of the government. As Banaji and Bhat write, "social media platforms and apps are regularly 'gamed' by the BJP IT cell to make topics trend or go viral, manipulating opinion through coordinated behaviour. Legacy media (newspapers and television news) then report the 'buzz' uncritically, selectively favouring the BJP".[16]

With India's vast numbers of internet and social media users (see Table 1), there is ample ground for the dissemination of propaganda by online supporters of the BJP. This explains how 'CoronaJihad' and 'TablighiVirus' became viral on Twitter and were highlighted on primetime TV shows. The ease with which anti-Muslim disinformation was propagated on social media through Twitter, Facebook, Vimeo, TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp suggests that "disinformation was more successful than truth on social media by almost every known metric".[17] The fact that online social media hashtags were 'gamed' to show hyperbolic content on 'Corona Jihad' contradicts earlier reports which stated that "#coronajihad was likely not a campaign crafted and executed by a single set of operators, but rather one in which individuals participated organically".[18] In June 2020, the Telangana High Court issued notices to Twitter and the government, on the basis of a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by Advocate Khaja Aijazuddin seeking the "removal of hashtags #Islamiccoronavirusjihad, #Coronajihad, #Tablighijamat, among others, from social media".[19]

		% of population
Total population of India (in January 2022)	1.40 billion	-
Number of mobile connections	1.14 billion	81.3
Number of internet users	658 million	47
Number of social media users	467 million	33.4

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Janna Anderson et al., "Experts Say the 'New Normal' in 2025 Will Be Far More Tech-Driven, Presenting More Big Challenges", *Pew Research Centre* (2021), www.pewresearch.org.

[14] Shakuntala Banaji and Ramnath Bhat, *Social Media and Hate* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 76.

[15] Ibid., 82.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Megan McBride et al., "The Psychology of (Dis)information: Case Studies and Implications", *CNA* (2021), www.cna.org.

[18] Sanjana Rajgarhia, "Targeted Harassment: The Spread of #CoronaJihad", *The Media Manipulation Casebook* (2020), www.mediamanipulation.org.

[19] Express News Service, "File Counter on Tweets Linking COVID-19 Spread to Islam: Telangana High Court to Twitter", *The New Indian Express* (2020), www.newindianexpress.com.

Tab. 1: Internet and Social Media Users in India (All figures are from January 2022)
Data collated from: Simon Kemp, "Digital 2022: India" (2022), *www.datareportal.com*

3.2 *Censorship by noise and censorship by silence*

As the report by Equality Labs points out, the sheer number of tweets generated on '#CoronaJihad', whether by software bots or autonomous human agents, reflects the problem of "censorship by noise".[20] Censorship by noise occurs when the "volume of content being pumped out by actors furthering a particular narrative dominates users' timelines and worldviews to the extent that no meaningful, competing narrative can break through algorithmic parameters to offer a different – and in this case, less hate-driven and violent – view".[21] Umberto Eco writes about the "censorship through noise" that is practised by the media:

> Noise becomes a cover ... the ideology of this censorship through noise can be expressed, with apologies to Wittgenstein, by saying, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must talk a great deal'.... To make a noise, you don't have to invent stories. All you have to do is report a story that is real but irrelevant, yet creates a hint of suspicion by the simple fact that it has been reported.... Noise can sometimes take the form of superfluous excess.[22]

The fact that the media selectively reported the number of Covid positive cases spread by the TJ congregation manufactured a conspiracy belief in 'Coronajihad', leading to a climate of suspicion fertile for the spread of TJ-related disinformation, in the form of misleading reportage, social media hashtags and TV debates. As the report by Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam says:

> the Hindu right-wing ecosystem latched onto the factual elements of the Jamaat case ... to spread misinformation about a grand Islamic conspiracy where Indian Muslims were deliberately defying the government-imposed lockdown to spread the virus.... The Islamophobic commentary on the Tablighi Jamaat has four interconnected dimensions: 1) they are contaminated/contaminating 2) they are 'uncivilised' 3) they are deceptive and 4) they are anti-national.[23]

One of the consequences of this concerted media narrative was that reports about the inadequacy of the state's efforts in mitigating the Covid crisis were muted. As Desai and Amarasingam write, "the Tablighi Jamaat gathering altered the nature of India's COVID-19 briefings, with discussions of the gathering receiving more time in briefings than any other topic raised by reporters, such as questions about personal protective equipment, testing strategies, and community transmission".[24] Hence, "censorship through noise" and "censorship through silence", as observed by Eco, are connected; the 'noise' about the culpability of the TJ was created by a controlled media that was 'silent' about governmental inaction in mitigating the crises of the pandemic.

The control of the media during the pandemic was effected when PM Narendra Modi interacted with journalists and stakeholders from print media in March 2020. Subsequently, news coverage about the pandemic was altered, thereafter containing, as one report says, "little mention of the

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[20] Soundararajan, et al., "Coronajihad", 20.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy and Other Occasional* Writings [2011]*,* trans. by Richard Dixon (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 87-88.
[23] Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam, "#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation and Anti-Muslim Violence in India", *Strong Cities Network*, *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2020), *www.strongcitiesnetwork.org*, 11-13.
[24] Ibid., 15.

poor planning and disastrous implementation of the lockdown, or the government's failure to prepare for the pandemic, such as by stockpiling crucial medical equipment for healthcare workers, despite early warnings by the World Health Organisation".[25] Media censorship also involved journalists facing arrests and intimidation during the pandemic. As reported by the Rights and Risks Analysis Group, journalists were arrested for "exposing alleged corruption" and "exposing shortage of food and personal protective equipment (PPE)".[26] Stories about administrative apathy and the inadequacies of medical healthcare were anathema to the state's urge to control the media narrative about the Covid crisis and to ensure that there was no criticism of the state failure's to address the calamitous effects of the pandemic.

The extent of governmental inaction was witnessed during the second wave of the pandemic in 2021. The government failed to adhere to scientific advice and warnings about the second wave, it mismanaged the vaccination programme and failed to "hire enough healthcare workers in anticipation of the second wave and upgrade its healthcare infrastructure to ensure adequate supply of oxygen and life-saving medicines".[27] Instead, the government responded "by filing first-information reports against those who question its vaccination policy, booking desperate family members for posting appeals on social media in order to secure oxygen for a dying relative and harassing overburdened healthcare workers into resigning from their posts".[28] Despite the alarming increase of Covid positive cases during the second wave, the *Kumbh Mela*, a mammoth gathering of Hindu devotees, was allowed to convene at Haridwar in the state of Uttarakhand in northern India. 161,736 new cases were reported during the Mela but mainstream TV news channels failed to report the role of the Mela in spreading the disease.[29] The approach of the media in reporting the number of positive cases from the TJ gathering and the Kumbh Mela is a study in contrast. It highlights the lack of independence of the media from state control and its willing participation in the propagation of anti-Muslim accusations.

3.3 *Inventing the enemy and scapegoat*

The BJP's manipulation of the media to generate Hindu nationalism is an established part of its mobilisation strategy. As Christiane Brosius writes, a "new public consciousness ... emerged with the audiovisual mediascape in the 1980s"[30] when the *Ramayana* serial and miscellaneous videos glorifying the Hindu deity Ram were produced and broadcast on national TV, thus transforming Ram into a national hero. This created fervour for the movement to establish the birthplace of Ram at Ayodhya and antagonism for the Babri Masjid that stood in the same place. Hindutva organisations led a national 'reawakening' to salvage Hindu pride that was purportedly oppressed by Muslim 'foreign invaders', implying that the remnants of invasion would have to be removed. Consequently, the demolition of the Babri mosque was carried out by Hindu nationalist volunteers or *karsevaks* as the culminating spectacle of Hindutva doctrine. Thus, actively engaging in the protection of the nation

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[25] Sagar, "Speaking Positivity to Power: Hours before Lockdown, Modi Asked Print-media Owners, Editors to Refrain from Negative COVID Coverage", *The Caravan* (2020), *www.caravanmagazine.in*.

[26] Suhas Chakma, "India: Media's Crackdown During COVID-19 Lockdown", *Rights and Risks Analysis Group* (2020), *www.rightsrisks.org*.

[27] Chahat Rana, "Culpable Carnage: How the Modi Government's Failure to Act Led to India's COVID-19 Catastrophe", *The Caravan* (2021), *www.caravanmagazine.in*.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Aniruddha Jena, Ram Awtar Yadav and Raviteja Rambarki, "Demonising the Others: Vendetta Coverage of Tablighi Jamaat and Kumbh Mela during the COVID-19 Pandemic in India", *Media Asia*, 48.8 (July 2021), 347-48.

[30] Christiane Brosius, *Empowering Visions: The Politics of Representation in Hindu Nationalism* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 99.

is the mark of Hindutva nationalism. But the "master-desire"[31] of protecting the nation, as Achille Mbembe said, requires the constant construction of an enemy. This "desire for the enemy" which leads to a perpetual 'invention' of the enemy underlies phantasmagoric images of Muslims as *jihadis* who caused the Covid crisis.

Examples of anti-Muslim disinformation stories on social media during the pandemic were collated by fact-checking websites such as 'mediascanner.in', altnews.in, and 'boomlive.in'. A reading of these compilations brings out similar tropes in the accusations against the TJ in particular and Muslims in general:

- Muslim vendors spat on fruits to spread coronavirus;
- Muslim restaurant owners and delivery men spat on food;
- Muslims licked utensils/sneezed in unison/spat at cops/contaminated rupee-notes to spread coronavirus;
- Hindus were denied rations in Karachi (in Pakistan);
- Covid-19 positive Muslim nationals from Iran and Italy were hiding in Indian cities like Patna to infect Indians;
- TJ members in quarantine demanded non-vegetarian food, urinated and defecated in the open, attacked health workers and sexually harassed female staff;
- Muslims defied the lockdown and gathered in mosques to spread coronavirus.

The dissemination of these narratives of disinformation portrayed Muslims as a ubiquitous 'threat', even though the nature and the target of the imputed threat varied across contexts – Muslims were accused of threatening or disobeying the government and its order of the lockdown, attacking policemen who were tasked with enforcing the lockdown, disrupting the efforts of healthcare workers and medical staff, infecting individuals living in gated housing colonies, contaminating consumers at restaurants. Each of these accusations is potentially absurd, but when propagated together, with accompanying hashtags and repeated by the entire media ad infinitum, these accusations become what René Girard has called "stereotypical accusations".[32] Through the mechanism of these accusations, as Girard writes, "a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness" is blamed to be "harmful to the whole of society" in times of crisis or disaster, leading to an "appetite for persecution" against religious minorities.[33] Once the blame has been established and the scapegoat personified, any number of fantastical and improbable claims can be levelled against them. These accusations are then accepted as commonplace knowledge about those who have been accused, as claims that do not require verification because they are attributed to those who are always already assumed to be suspect. As Girard writes, "many individual scandals come together against one and the same victim" during a period of "malaise", such that "the accusing group ... views the victim as guilty, by virtue of a contagion ... the members of this group accuse their 'scapegoat' with great fervour and sincerity ... some incident, whether fantastic or trivial, has triggered a wave of opinion against this victim".[34] Girard's delineation of the scapegoating phenomenon is vividly illustrated in the Indian state and media's accusations against the Tablighi Jamaat congregation, Muslim foreign nationals who had attended the TJ meeting, Muslim citizens of India and even Rohingya refugees living in camps in India. The common Muslim identity of the scapegoat is unmistakable. The scapegoating of the TJ by the media was also noted by the Bombay High Court in its judgement dismissing the FIRs against 29

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[31] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* [2016]*,* trans. by Steven Corcoran (Durham and London: Duke U.P., 2019), 39.
[32] René Girard, *The Scapegoat* [1982], trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1986), 15.
[33] Ibid., 6-15.
[34] René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* [1999], trans. by James G. Williams (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 156-57.

foreign national members of the TJ who had been charged, inter alia, under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, sections of the Epidemic Diseases Act 1897, the Foreigners Act 1946 and the Disaster Management Act 2005.

A quantitative study of Islamophobia on Twitter analysed the user bios of Twitter handles which posted anti-Muslim hate speech, and observed that there is a direct co-relation between Twitter members who identify themselves as 'Hindu nationalist' or 'proud Hindu' and accused the Tablighi Jamaat and Muslims of India of being "anti-nationalist".[35] The study also found that "users who posted a majority of hateful tweets ... are clustered closely together" implying that Twitter users who "spread hate closely followed each other".[36] This reflects what Sahana Udupa has written about Twitter being an "affinity space" for like-minded, ideologically motivated net users who "cohere around common themes and issues in ideologically efficacious ways".[37] Udupa uses the term "Internet Hindus" to describe a distinct presence of Hindutva or right-wing Hindu nationalists in the online sphere. As Udupa writes, 'Internet Hindus' "deluge social media platforms with provocative and abusive comments" that project Indian Muslims as "active participants in international Islamic revivalism".[38] Internet Hindus draw upon suspicion and animosity prevailing against Muslims of India and congeal these sentiments in the online sphere, where political discourse about Muslims need not be hemmed in by a semblance of moderation or caution. Thus, the most provocative hashtags become the most viral, explaining why 'CoronaJihad' and 'TablighiVirus' attracted so much traffic on Twitter.

4. Understanding the Nature of Islamophobia during the Covid-19 Pandemic in India

4.1 *The discontents of naming Islamophobia*

Despite extensive academic discussion on the subject, Islamophobia still remains a much-debated term. Sindre Bangstad writes that Islamophobia is contested "not only in far-right circles in the West, but also among liberal elites, and even within academia itself".[39] Nathan C. Lean observes that the debate about the aptness and efficacy of this term has involved "hackneyed deliberations about the possibility of alternative words" that can be used in its stead, such as "anti-Muslim prejudice", "anti-Islam prejudice", "anti-Muslim bigotry" or "anti-Muslim hate".[40] Lean argues that this semantic quibble is unnecessary, because a public understanding has already emerged that Islamophobia is "a form of prejudice that targets Muslims on the basis of their religious identity, and that this form of prejudice is no more acceptable than others that occupy the same mental category".[41] The discourse about Islamophobia in Western states such as the UK has been shaped by initiatives such as the 'Report on the inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred' by the All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (APPG). The APPG Report contains a definitional trajectory of Islamophobia that began with the Runnymede Trust Report in 1997.[42]

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[35] Mohit Chandra et al., "'A Virus Has No Religion': Analysing Islamophobia on Twitter during the COVID-19 Outbreak", *Proceedings of the 32nd ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media* (2021), 73.

[36] Ibid., 73.

[37] Sahana Udupa, "Internet Hindus: Right-Wingers as New India's Ideological Warriors", in Peter van der Veer, ed., *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City: Aspiration and Urbanisation in the Twenty-First Century* (Oaklan: California U.P., 2015), 438.

[38] Ibid., 439.

[39] Sindre Bangstad, "Islamophobia: What's in a Name?", *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 5.2 (2016), 145.

[40] Nathan C. Lean, "The Debate over the Utility and Precision of the Term 'Islamophobia'", in Irene Zempi and Imran Awan, eds., *The Routledge International Handbook of Islamophobia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 11-12.

[41] Ibid., 15.

[42] All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, "Report on the Inquiry into a Working Definition of Islamophobia/anti-Muslim Hatred" (2018), 23-25.

In India, there is little agreement about what Islamophobia actually refers to and whether the nature of anti-Muslim prejudice, hate and violence warrants being termed Islamophobia. For example, Ajay Gudavarthy insists that India has a history of co-existence between Hindu and Muslim communities in which periodic outbursts of inter-communal violence are more appropriately labelled 'communalism' and not Islamophobia.[43] Islamophobia is imputed to be a Western neologism for a Western problem. The search for non-Western or 'Indian' words for naming hate and violence is misplaced. Moreover, as the genealogy of 'communalism' in India by Gyanendra Pandey shows, the import of Western/colonialist historiography is discernible even in liberal-nationalistic writings on communalism which perceive the latter in essentialist terms as the primitive Other of the secular modern nation.[44]

Dismissing the need to recognise Islamophobia does not arise merely from semantic quibbles. In March 2022, India's permanent representative to the United Nations objected to the UN resolution to observe March 15 as the international day to combat Islamophobia. The objections may have stemmed from the fact that the resolution was proposed by Pakistan. The Indian representative called on the UN to condemn "religiophobia" rather than "singling out" Islamophobia;[45] he claimed that there is a need to recognise 'Hinduphobia' along with other acts of hatred against Buddhism and Sikhism. He also expressed disagreement with the UN's latest Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) adopted by the UN General Assembly in June 2021, which sought to extend the meaning of terrorism to include violence committed on the basis of xenophobia, intolerance and violent extremism. The Indian representative's refutation of the GCTS's move to include xenophobic, right-wing violence within the repertoire of terrorist acts mirrors India's own record of anti-Muslim violence, which is staunchly denied by the government and its supporters. As increasing levels of everyday anti-Muslim violence attract criticism from international quarters, government ministers allege that anti-India and anti-Modi forces are bent on maligning the government, while maintaining a political doublespeak about India being a diverse, inclusive nation committed to co-existence and harmony. For example, when UK MP Naz Shah urged PM Boris Johnson to raise the issue of Islamophobia during his visit to India in April 2022, Union Minister for Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi tweeted, "Please, don't convert your prejudiced agenda of 'India phobia' into 'Islamophobia'".[46] In a nutshell, the fundamental act of naming Islamophobia, which is germane to any concern of addressing anti-Muslim violence, is repudiated by the establishment by resorting to whataboutery and counter-narratives of 'religiophobia', 'Hinduphobia' and 'Indiaphobia'.

4.2 Hindutva and the 'Muslim Enemy'

The denial of Islamophobia in India is consonant with denying that violence, such as acts of murderous hate against Muslims, has taken place at all. Violence against Muslims in India is framed in a narrative that makes Muslims permanently susceptible to violence and at the same time, 'deserving' of the same. This framing of Muslims as responsible for the acts of violence committed to them is executed by personifying the Muslim as a *jihadi* or terrorist. Hence, despite the involvement of agents of the state such as the police, in acts of violence – lynching of Muslims by *gau-rakshaks* or cow-protection squads, anti-Muslim pogroms, unlawful incarceration of Muslims and torture in jail –

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[43] Ajay Gudavarthy, "There is Communalism – not Islamophobia – in India", *The Wire* (2019), *www.thewire.in*.

[44] Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford U.P., 1990), see chapters 1 and 2.

[45] Simon Hooper, "France, EU and India Opposed Creation of UN Day to Combat Islamophobia", *Middle East Eye* (2022), *www.middleeasteye.net*.

[46] Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, "@naqvimukhtar", *Twitter* (2022), *www.twitter.com*.

the state continues to act with impunity. Unsurprisingly, the media is involved in synonymising Muslims as *jihadis*. As I have written elsewhere,[47] when Najeeb Ahmad, a Muslim student in JNU was assaulted by the BJP student wing and then disappeared in October 2016, sections of the media reported that Najeeb had searched for information on ISIS, been radicalised, become a *jihadi* and fled to join ISIS. These Islamophobic assertions by the media, contested by Najeeb's mother, swayed public opinion against him. Eventually, the Central Bureau of Investigation's piecemeal attempts to search for Najeeb and restore him to his family were dropped. Najeeb was forgotten and remains missing till date.

In recent speeches by BJP activists which ineluctably descend into anti-Muslim invective, Muslims are invariably referred to as *jihadis*. This provides the context to understand why the term 'CoronaJihad' found public acceptance during the pandemic. The *jihadi* is a fixture of how Muslims are imagined in India today: enemies of the state with doubtful patriotism and hidden links with Pakistan and anti-India forces, disposable lives that can be killed at will in extra-judicial killings euphemistically called 'encounters', beef-eaters who are lynched by mobs of 'cow-protectors' and then charged by the police under anti-cow slaughter laws, permanent suspects for the carceral state which imprisons them on fabricated charges and second-class citizens undeserving of justice so that they languish in prison without trial for years before being acquitted. As Ratna Kapur writes, "The construction of the Muslim as a subject to be feared and who poses a threat from which the sovereign subject requires protection erodes the legitimacy of the Indian Muslim, who is increasingly cast as a foreigner, alien and outsider ... outside the realm of juridical entitlements, legibility, and belongingness".[48]

The conditions of virulent Islamophobia have been engineered by the ideology of Hindutva, popularised by its chief ideologue Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. As Pankaj Mishra writes, in Savarkar's worldview, revenge, retribution and hatred were elevated to a "categorical imperative".[49] Savarkar propounded Hindutva as a means of unifying Hindus by inculcating in them hatred for a common enemy. He portrayed Muslims as the enemy or non-self against whom Hindu selves would mobilise to form a strong Hindu nation. He wrote, "Nothing makes Self conscious of itself so much as a conflict with non-self. Nothing can weld peoples [sic] into a nation and nations into a state as the pressure of a common foe. Hatred separates as well as unites".[50] Reminiscent to Savarkar, contemporary Hindutva leaders invest in depicting Muslims as the enemy of Hindus. As Marzia Casolari explains in her work on the connection between Hindutva and fascist Italy, "the theme of the 'internal enemy'" is an "element of affinity" between the ideology of fascism and Hindu nationalism.[51]

The writings of Savarkar, as Jyotirmaya Sharma points out, essentialise the Muslim non-self as the "other" of the Hindu self; accordingly, Muslims are caricatured as "sensuous, lascivious, immoral, unethical and impious".[52] It was Savarkar who etched out the many ways in which Muslims conspire to harm Hindus and Hinduism. His accusations against Muslims provide the grounds on which contemporary followers of Hindutva including online supporters of BJP construct conspiracy theories

[47] Heba Ahmed, "How the Sangh Parivar Framed Najeeb as a Terrorist", *The Companion* (2018), *www.thecompanion.in*.

[48] Ratna Kapur, *Makeshift Migrants and Law: Gender, Belonging, and Postcolonial Anxieties* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), 167.

[49] Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 141.

[50] Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2007), 91.

[51] Marzia Casolari, "Hindutva's Foreign Tie-up in the 1930s: Archival Evidence", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35.4 (January 2000), 226.

[52] Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India 2015), 70-71.

of Islamic *jihad.* The stereotyping and scapegoating of Muslims that occurred during the pandemic and after are the bequest of Savarkar's distorted anti-Muslim imagery.

4.3 *Analysing 'Corona Jihad' through the components of Islamophobia*

In the preceding sections, the components of Islamophobia have been variously listed as hate, prejudice, bigotry and enmity. These components are often cited as interchangeable phenomena. Another key component of Islamophobia — conspiracy belief — has remained understudied in existing scholarship on Islamophobia. A recent study on the nature of Islamophobia addresses these lacunae and propounds the Tripartite Islamophobia Scale (TIS), which proposes a systematic analysis of Islamophobia according to three "subcomponents, namely, anti-Muslim prejudice, anti-Islamic sentiment, and conspiracy beliefs".[53] The TIS study investigates these components across five countries: India, Poland, Germany, France and USA. The study also tests discrete emotional underpinnings of Islamophobia, namely fear, anger and disgust. According to the TIS scale of Islamophobia, 'anger' and 'disgust' are "significantly stronger predictors of anti-Muslim prejudice in India" when compared with fear. The TIS study analysed anti-Muslim prejudice and conspiracy beliefs to have "larger effects on behavioural inclinations that promote the active and forceful oppression of Muslims and Islamic organisations".[54] It associated conspiracy beliefs with "dehumanisation"[55] and inferred that "Islamophobic conspiracy beliefs were a statistically unique factor" in the countries studied.[56]

The narrative of 'Corona Jihad' proves the TIS study's findings about the prevalence of conspiracy belief, anger and disgust as the components of Islamophobia resulting in the dehumanisation of Muslims and Islamic organisations such as the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) in India. As conspiracy belief about the TJ congregation being a super-spreader of the coronavirus spread through online disinformation, suspicion and anger was intensified against the TJ in particular and Muslims in general. This led to incidents of routine violence, such as the lynching of Dilshad Ali by three men who suspected him of being Covid positive.[57] Another Muslim man, Dilshad Mohammed died by suicide when his neighbours in Bangarh, a village in Himachal Pradesh, a state in northern India, accused him of trying to infect them with the virus.[58] Dilshad had merely given a ride to two TJ members to the village on his scooter, but the stigmatisation and social boycott that he was subjected to resulted in his death. In Karnataka, a state in southern India, a BJP Member of Parliament, Anant Kumar Hegde, denounced the TJ members as "terrorists".[59] This was followed by a spate of anti-Muslim attacks in Karnataka. Sayed Tabrez and his mother Zareen Taj were among "seven Muslim volunteers who were assaulted by a gang of local BJP members" while the former were trying to distribute food to "impoverished people in the Marathahalli and Dasarahalli districts of Karnataka".[60]

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[53] Fatih Uenal et al., "The Nature of Islamophobia: A Test of a Tripartite View in Five Countries", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 47.2 (2021), 275.

[54] Ibid., 286.

[55] Ibid., 285.

[56] Ibid., 287.

[57] Bharath Syal, "CoronaJihad: Stigmatization of Indian Muslims in the COVID-19 Pandemic", *South Asia Journal* (2020), *www.southasiajournal.net*.

[58] Aniruddha Ghosal et al., "Indian Muslims Face Stigma, Blame for Surge in Infections", *AP News* (2020), *www.apnews.com*.

[59] Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, "Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories Targeting Muslims Spread in India", *The Guardian* (2020), *www.theguardian.com*.

[60] Ibid.

In Ahmedabad Civil Hospital, Covid patients were kept in separate wards depending on their religious identity.[61]

Segregation of people on the basis of their religious or caste identity is not a stray occurrence in India. It is built into the hierarchy of caste as the foundational logic of social organisation, which divides individuals according to their caste status into enclaves and excludes the 'out-casts' or Dalits into a state of 'untouchability'. As the anti-caste philosopher, B. R. Ambedkar wrote in his famous work 'Annihilation of Caste', "Religion compels the Hindus to treat isolation and segregation of castes as a virtue".[62] Ambedkar illustrates caste segregation by enumerating instances of Dalits denied entry into temples, forbidden from using village wells and Dalit children prohibited from attending public schools along with children of upper-caste families. As Isabel Wilkerson writes, "In some parts of India, the lowest-caste people were to remain a certain number of paces from any dominant-caste person while walking out in public – somewhere between twelve and ninety-six steps away, depending on the castes in question".[63] The "ritual logic of caste",[64] as Soumyabrata Choudhury writes, involves society in a logic of segmentation and 'distanciation' that is different from the disciplinary logic of 'social distancing'. While social distancing is a pandemic rule necessitated to prevent the spread of the virus from human contact, the ritual distance of caste imposes taboos on human contact to prevent 'impure' beings from 'polluting' the 'purer' ones. Hence, the caste logic of ritual purity and pollution ascribes codes of purity and impurity to higher and lower caste individuals and places the burden of maintaining the boundary between 'pure' and 'polluted' on the untouchable or Dalit caste. As Ambedkar wrote, "the Untouchable was required to carry an earthen pot hung around his neck wherever he went – for holding his spit, lest his spit falling on the earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it".[65]

The paradox of the sociality of spitting in India is that it is both a ubiquitous masculine habit and an object of revulsion or disgust. In 2016, the Health Minister, while replying to a question in parliament about the "spitting menace" said, "India is a spitting country. We spit when we are bored; we spit when we are tired; we spit when we are angry or we spit just like that".[66] But there are "elaborate do's and don'ts with respect to spit as it relates to contact with food, vessels, cups and so on",[67] as Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai write. The paradox is resolved by implementing the logic of caste purity; all men spit but the saliva of the impure scapegoat must be excoriated because of the 'disgust' it invokes. Accordingly, during the pandemic, Muslims were accused of infecting Hindus by spitting in public, and a propaganda of disinformation alleged that Muslims are spitting on currency-notes, licking food and vessels in restaurants, spreading saliva on fruits and vegetables peddled by Muslim vendors. Muslims became an object of Islamophobic disgust and the narrative of 'Corona Jihad' and 'Thook (spit) Jihad' came into effect.

Anti-Muslim prejudice and caste logic of segregating and excluding the impure scapegoat was carried out to the extent of social and economic boycott of Muslims. During the pandemic, in Delhi, a "self-organised group of residents" banned Muslims from entering their neighbourhood; in Buldhana, Maharashtra, a state in western India, "messages went viral on social media ... urging people to

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[61] Sohini Ghosh and Parimal A. Dabhi, "Ahmedabad Hospital Splits COVID Wards on Faith, Says Govt Decision", *The Indian Express* (2020), *www.indianexpress.com*.

[62] B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, ed. by S. Anand (London and New York: Verso, 2014; New Delhi: Navayana, 2014), 155.

[63] Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 81.

[64] Soumyabrata Choudhury, *Now It's Come to Distances: Notes on Shaheenbagh and Coronavirus, Association and Isolation,* (New Delhi: Navayana 2020), 104.

[65] B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste,* 125-126.

[66] Aparna Alluri, "Covid-19: India's Unwinnable Battle against Spitting", *BBC* (2021), *www.bbc.com*.

[67] Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *Experience, Caste and the Everyday Social* (New Delhi: Oxford U.P., 2019), 54.

boycott the entire Muslim community because 16 out of local 17 Covid-19 patients were Muslim"; people were urged to boycott Muslim-owned shops and "Muslim shoppers were also turned away from other shops"; in Deoria district of Uttar Pradesh, Suresh Tiwari, a BJP Member of the Legislative Assembly asked people not to buy vegetables from Muslim vendors.[68] The segregation and boycott of Muslims from public spaces extended even to public toilets. In Telinipara in West Bengal, where a Muslim tested Covid positive, Hindu residents of the area stopped Muslims from using the public toilet. This led to a local brawl which was halted by police intervention. But two days later on 12 May 2020, a violent mob descended upon the area, attacked and burnt Muslim homes, shops, and vehicles owned by Muslims. Though some homes of Hindu families were partially damaged, ground-level evidence showed that "Muslim houses and shops were singled out and strategically targeted".[69]

It would be appropriate to conclude this section by re-focusing on the Tablighi Jamaat, which found itself at the centre of the storm of disinformation. While the TJ congregation was called a "Talibani crime" and TJ members were blacklisted by the government, arrested by the police and dehumanised by the media, the elders of the Tablighi Jamaat advised their companions to observe "a year of patience".[70] In April 2020, after the TJ members had recovered from Covid, they volunteered to donate their plasma since plasma therapy had been proposed as a possible treatment in Covid. Maulana Anees Ahmad Nadvi, the manager of Tablighi Jamaat in the city of Lucknow said, "The message has reached all the members ... all of them are ready to donate their plasma ... this is true that Jamaatis are being presented as 'villains' after coronavirus spread, but Maulana Saad has asked us to forgive those doing this".[71] By practising patience and humanitarianism, the Tablighi Jamaat hoped to appeal to the conscience of those who had dehumanised them.

5. Counting the Many Iterations of 'Jihad'

The meaning of *jihad* in the Hindutva imagination has been essentialised as Islamic conquest. It entered the political lexicon of Hindutva after the 9/11 terror attacks and the subsequent War on Terror discourse of securitisation. With the construction of Muslims as security threats and the pathologisation of "Muslim rage", the word *jihad* acquired currency in an international context. In India, where a coherent sense of Hindu victimisation by Muslim aggressors already existed, *jihad* acquired immediate significance. Events and epochs as discrete as the invasion of Hindustan by Mahmud of Ghazni and Muhammad Ghori, the Mughal Empire, the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan were dovetailed into a linear chronicle of Hindu defeat by Muslim outsiders. The themes of Muslim aggression were common: Muslims had destroyed temples, forced Hindus to convert en masse to Islam, and abducted Hindu women for polygamous marriages. This was the long narrative of mythic civilisational decline which Savarkar and his cohorts sought to reverse and avenge.

As Kathinka Frøystad writes, when the neologism of 'love jihad' was coined in 2005 by RSS activist Pramod Muthalik, it "helped *popularise* the Muslim takeover conspiracy rather than inventing

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[68] Mohammed Afeef, "Does Law Allow Calls to Boycott Muslims during the COVID-19 Lockdown?", *The Wire* (2020), www.thewire.in.

[69] Himadri Ghosh, "Ground Report: What Really Happened in Violence-hit Telinipara, West Bengal", *The Wire* (2020), www.thewire.in.

[70] Nikhila Henry, "'Year of Patience': How Young Tablighis Survived COVID-19 Stigma", *The Quint* (2021), www.thequint.com.

[71] Press Trust of India (PTI), "Tablighi Jamaat Asks Its Coronavirus-cured Members to Donate Plasma and Shed 'Villain' Tag", *The Hindu* (2020), www.thehindu.com.

it out of thin air".[72] Muthalik's motive was to raise the alarm against Hindu women marrying or entering into relationships with Muslim men, and to hold Muslim men guilty of seducing Hindu women, marrying them by force and converting them to Islam. As Frøystad writes, Muthalik's neologism was followed by Hindutva organisations campaigning "to continue the ideological creativity and enhance anxieties that served the Hindu nationalist agenda ... to expand the semantic field of 'jihad'".[73]

The 'semantic field of *jihad*' has been expanded to accommodate a gamut of conspiracy theories about Muslims, and right-wing TV channels are at the forefront of this propaganda. In March 2020, Sudhir Chaudhary, the editor-in-chief of Zee News ran a story on the different kinds of *jihad* on his prime-time show which included absurd specimens like 'Land Jihad' (capturing land to build mosques, madarsas or Islamic seminaries and cemeteries for Muslims), 'History Jihad' (the manipulation of history to glorify Mughal rule), 'Education Jihad' (building 'madarsas'[74] and promoting the Arabic language), 'Secularism Jihad', 'Population Jihad' (Muslim men marrying multiple wives to increase the population of Muslims and outnumber Hindus).[75] In September 2020, Suresh Chavhanke of Sudarshan TV, who had previously spread disinformation on 'Corona Jihad', broadcast a show on 'UPSC Jihad' in which he claimed to have undertaken "investigative journalism" to reveal "anti-national activities" such as the infiltration of the bureaucracy by Muslim students qualifying in the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examination.[76] Chavhanke claimed that Muslim students were getting benefits such as relaxation in the criterion of the age limit, more chances to re-take the examination, lower qualifying marks, availability of free coaching centres, and preferential treatment in the interview round at the expense of Hindu students. In April 2022, Chavhanke came up with 'Naukri Jihad' on his TV show, in which he alleged that Pawan Hans, a government-owned helicopter service provider, had hired nine Muslim candidates from Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) University in New Delhi to work as apprentices and excluded Hindus.[77] The channel broadcast a video showing saffron-clad women from Hindutva organisations agitating outside the Pawan Hans office, where Ragini Tiwari, a Hindutva activist with a record of anti-Muslim hate speeches, claimed that the company was against Hindus and acting in collaboration with JMI. It is relevant to note here that JMI being a Muslim minority institute has faced the ire of the government, police batons on campus and even a shooting incident in 2020, for being the epicentre of protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act.

One of the myths that Hindutva ideology has circulated about Muslims is that they enjoy a state of 'appeasement' by secular political parties such as the Indian National Congress and this has resulted in disempowerment and discrimination against Hindus. As Aakar Patel writes, in 2019, after five years in power, the BJP still clung to its complaint against "appeasement of one, at the cost of the other".[78] The accusation of Muslims being accorded the status of being appeased is strange, since it is not borne out by the facts of political representation and socio-economic marginalisation of Muslims in India. As a result of their meagre employment in the formal sector, Muslims have to fall back upon self-employment in the informal sector. It is this arena of employment of Muslims that is being

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[72] Kathinka Frøystad, "Sound Biting Conspiracy: From India with 'Love Jihad'", *Religions*, 12.1064 (2021), 3, italics in the original.
[73] Ibid., 17.
[74] A 'madarsa' is a school instituted for secular education along with Islamic knowledge.
[75] Meghnad S, "Bloodlust TV: Sudhir Chaudhary's Campaign of Hate, Powered by Sensodyne", *Newslaundry* (2020), www.newslaundry.com.
[76] Pooja Chaudhuri, "Sudarshan News Show 'UPSC Jihad' Riddled with False Claims", *Alt News* (2020), www.altnews.in.
[77] Veronica Joseph, "Now 'Naukri Jihad': Sudarshan News is Back to Targeting Muslims over Employment", *Newslaundry* (2022), www.newslaundry.com.
[78] Aakar Patel, *Our Hindu Rashtra: What It Is, How We Got Here* (Chennai: Westland, 2020), 94.

targeted by conspiracy theories of 'Thook Jihad', which has resulted in Hindus calling for the boycott of Muslim-owned eateries, the closure of meat shops owned by Muslims, and repeated assaults on Muslim vendors.

In April 2022, when JCB bulldozers demolished shanties and push-carts in the Muslim locality of Jahangirpuri in Delhi, following an incident of communal violence in the area, the demolition drive was hailed on Twitter and JCB was denoted as the 'Jihad Control Board'. Islamophobic conspiracy beliefs of *jihad* and the concomitant measures of counter-terror security have come to a full circle.

6. Conclusion: Towards a Negative Solidarity?

> In the literature of contagion, when society is finally free of disease, it's up to humanity to decide how to begin again.[79]

Hannah Arendt imagined the possibility of solidarity and the conditions needed to build solidarity in the bleakness of a world confronting the terrifying possibility of a nuclear apocalypse. She wrote, "The solidarity of mankind in this respect is entirely negative; it rests ... on a common interest in an agreement which prohibits the use of atomic weapons".[80] Negative solidarity, for Arendt, was founded on the common fear of global destruction. But negative solidarity can acquire true value only when it is "coupled with political responsibility"; as Arendt wrote, "if the solidarity of mankind is to be based on something more solid than the justified fear of man's demonic capabilities ... something more promising than a tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else, then a process of mutual understanding and progressing self-clarification on a gigantic scale must take place".[81]

As Francesco Tava writes, Arendt's idea of solidarity is underpinned by shared "negative emotions" such as anger, resentment and indignation against perceived injustice.[82] Solidarity is then an "intersubjective relation" in which people are united not by their "sense of identity or belonging nor any positive similarity but their negative emotional reaction to something that strikes them as unjust".[83] Hence, while negative emotions may serve as a prerequisite for solidarity, solidarity is needed for its "functional role in motivating compliance with the demands of justice", as Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka write.[84] Negative emotions like anger and resentment can thus be made to unite people in identifying sources of injustice and strengthening the cause of justice.

But here lies the problem of achieving solidarity; as Banting and Kymlicka admit, inclusive solidarity is bounded by an ethical community of citizens within a shared nationhood.[85] This makes solidarity fragile and open to manipulation by the media and political elites. For example, political actors can "mobilise divisions" between the majority population and "historical minorities", thereby endangering solidarity.[86] National identities can be prevented from impeding solidarity between the majority and minority communities, only if national identity itself is thinned out and based on less ascriptive forms of nationalism. On the other hand, if anger, resentment and desire for retributive

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[79] Jill Lepore, "How Do Plague Stories End?", *The New Yorker* (2021), *www.newyorker.com*.

[80] Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 83.

[81] Ibid., 83-84.

[82] Francesco Tava, "Justice, Emotions, and Solidarity", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, (February 2021), 10.

[83] Ibid., 13.

[84] Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka, eds., *The Strains of Commitment: The Political Sources of Solidarity in Diverse Societies* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2017), 7.

[85] Ibid., 12.

[86] Ibid., 13.

violence (in other words, Islamophobia) become the hallmark of majoritarian identity and the leitmotif of nationalism, the possibility for solidarity with minorities becomes negligible. Negative emotions then no longer help in identifying injustice; they are misdirected towards the scapegoating of minorities instead. As Sally Scholz writes, solidarity in this instance is akin to "bonds of sentiment" of opposition to a common enemy.[87]

During the Covid pandemic in India, the unjust apathy and malfeasance of the state in curbing the spread of disease was misrecognised as the contamination of the citizenry by Muslims acting upon malicious intent. The disinformation against Muslims fuelled by social media was an example of what Meera Nanda has called the "Big Lies" of India; as Nanda writes, "no amount of debunking can dislodge a lie once it becomes part of a larger narrative that *seems* believable because it addresses some deeper existential anxieties and political interests".[88] The Covid pandemic was called the apocalypse of our times, during which we lived with the uncertain possibility of contagion and death every day. Nothing was safe from the virus, "including the pursuit of safety itself", as Zygmunt Bauman writes.[89] But there was no circumstance in which a commonly felt fear of contamination and disease could bind anyone to their neighbour. There was no acknowledgement of mutual corporeal vulnerability; on the contrary, a discipline of distancing was imposed on collective existence. Within this sphere of isolation, the scapegoats were chosen as targets of collective blame. By blaming the scapegoats again and again and rendering them the perpetual targets of blame and inhumanly worthy of blame, the chances of recognising and calling out injustice against them were nullified. There are only negative emotions felt for the scapegoats: disgust, anger and hostility. The possibility for any solidarity with them has been absent till now. There is no apparent end to this; even after the fear of contagion comes to an end, the process of blaming and conspiring does not stop. Fear anger and disgust towards the scapegoated minority makes way for the emergence of another kind of 'negative solidarity', namely the one inculcated by the nation in its patriots against deviant citizens. This solidarity is the result of thickening of national identities, of negative emotions deflected away from systemic injustice and directed towards citizens from minority communities and of unwavering loyalty to the state and its institutions, despite the injustice perpetrated by them.

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[87] Sally J. Scholz, *Political Solidarity* (Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State U.P., 2008), 44.

[88] Meera Nanda, "Big Lies and Deep Lies in Post-Truth India", *The Wire* (2022), *www.thewire.in*, italics in the original.

[89] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (New York: New York U.P., 1997), 6.